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ABSTRACT

This study combined qualitative and quantitative methods to assess the reasons many women use indirect messages to say "no" to men's attempts to escalate sexual intimacy. Subjects were six female students at a large southwestern university. At one time, one group had four women, at another time the group had two women. All were Caucasian. The room used was arranged to be comfortable and non-academic, and casual conversation was engaged in before the session was tape recorded. A prior study which found that women tend to use indirect messages in sexual situations was explained, and the focus groups were guided by a list of previously developed probes to assess the research question. Reasons cited in the groups for why women use indirect messages ranged from negative past experiences, to societal norms, to level of maturity, and personality traits of the male and female. While much data was provided by these focus groups, the inability to generalize led to the development and administration of a questionnaire to 29 female students in communication courses at a West Coast university. Findings confirmed the impressions provided by the focus groups--women apparently consider certain relational consequences to be reasonably likely outcomes of their sexual resistance messages, and view these as especially likely outcomes of direct resistance messages. The anticipation of negative outcomes may contribute to women's reluctance to use direct messages in this context. Using multiple research methods allows for more confidence in the results. (Contains a table of data, 14 references, and the questionnaire.) (NKA)

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Running Head: Women's Indirect "No"

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Using Focus Groups To Design A Quantitative Measure: Women's Indirect "No" to Sexual Intimacy

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Using Focus Groups To Design A Quantitative Measure: Women's Indirect "No" to Sexual Intimacy

Abstract

This paper supplies an example of combining qualitative and quantitative methods to explore social phenomena. Focus groups were used to generate understanding on why women use indirect messages to say "No" to men's attempts at sexual escalation. The findings from the focus groups were used to develop a questionnaire and to provide greater understanding of those statistical resuts. Is it suggested that combining methods leads to a broader and more complete understanding of the phenomena under study.

Using Focus Groups To Design A Quantitative Measure: Women's Indirect "No" to Sexual Intimacy

Triangulation is the acceptance and utilization of multiple theories, fields, researchers, and methods in social scientific inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation of methods is different from replication because a variety of circumstances and procedures are used to answer a given question. For example, one could observe a phenomenon via a pencil-and-paper questionnaire, in a focus group, with content analysis of written documents, and direct observation in a natural setting. Yeilding the same results in different forms may help the researcher gain a broader understanding and more complete knowledge about the phenomenon of study.

Imagine, for example, that I want to describe the "juiciness" of an orange. First I may weigh the orange, knowing that a heavier fruit tends to indicate more juice. However, this is not always the case, and I may end up quite wrong in my prediction. If I decided to cut open the orange to see if it looked juicy, then I may be more certain of my knowledge, however, I am relying solely on my observation skills. I may decide to taste the orange to utilize another way of knowing. I may be even more certain of my knowledge now, but I am still relying on my inherently subjective perception. So perhaps I ask a friend to taste a slice to validate my perception. Even if we agree, we are still relying on only our sense of taste. Perhaps instead I decide to squeeze the orange and see if a substantial amount of liquid drips out. While I can measure the amount of liquid, I will be unable to ascertain if it is in fact juice (with that tangy sweetness) or whether it is merely a watery and distasteful substance. If I have the

opportunity to use all of these ways of knowing, however, I can feel more confident in my diagnosis than if I had relied on one method alone.

In this paper I will be describing an example of combining a qualitative and a quantitative method to assess the reasons many women often use indirect messages to say "no" to men's attempts to escalate sexual intimacy. In a previous study (Motley & Reeder, 1994), a fellow researcher and myself found that women are more likely to use indirect messages than direct messages as a response to men's sexual escalation efforts, while men are unlikely to understand the indirect message to indicate resistance, and hence, continue to pursue their interest. We were left with the question of why women continue to choose to be indirect if such messages do not communicate clearly the woman's desire. To answer this question, focus groups with women were conducted to supply qualitative data. Using this information, a questionnaire was designed to assess the reasons for the females' behavior quantitatively. The same responses were yielded in both the focus groups and on the questionnaire.

Resistance to Sexual Escalation

Given that men are typically the aggressors in initiating escalation of sexual intimacy in heterosexual relationships (Shotland, 1989; Perper & Weis, 1987; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992), women learn to develop resistance strategies to indicate to the man that her threshold has been reached and that his continued sexual escalation behavior is unwanted. Sometimes these resistance message are understood and complied with, however other times they are not and the outcome for the woman ranges from acceptable to bothersome to physically and/or psychologically traumatic. This latter outcome is fairly common. A review of the literature reveals that

between 34% and 83% of all women have experienced sexual aggression in a dating relationship (Byers, 1988).

If a woman indicates a desire not to engage in increased physical intimacy, why does a man continue his attempts? Past explanations have taken either a biological or sociological approach. The biological or "nature" explanation claims that men are inherently more oriented toward sexual behavior than women (Byers, 1988). The social or "nurture" explanation asserts that the roles and norms for masculine behavior accounts for male sexual aggression in dating relationships (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992; Muehlenhard & McCoy, 1991; Shotland & Goodstein, 1992). What these explanations have in common is the view that male sexual aggression is a fact of life, that "boys will be boys", and that little short of laws or resocialization can be done to change this behavior.

Another explanation, not typically taken in research, is addressing this problem from a communication perspective. Most research assumes that when a woman sends a resistance message, the man understands the message to mean resistance, and any further attempts at sexual escalation must be based on the male's biological or sociological disposition. A recent study, however, indicates that men do not always understand the woman's message to mean resistance (Motley & Reeder, 1994). Rather, messages women use in an attempt to thwart male escalation of sexual intimacy vary in directness; the degree to which the literal or denotative meaning of the message reflects its intended connotation (Searle, 1976). Further, many messages sent by women under these circumstances are more indirect (e.g., "It's getting late") than direct (e.g., "Let's stop this") and men are unlikely to interpret an indirect message as resistance. Instead men may attribute other meanings to these

messages. For example, while the message "I don't know you well enough for this" was generally meant by women to mean "Stop", men typically interpreted the message to mean "She wants to go further, but wants me to know that she usually only does this with people she has known longer" (Motley & Reeder, 1994, p. 21).

If men are unlikely to understand an indirect message to mean resistance to sexual escalation, why do women continue to use such messages? If ambiguous messages do not "work" in terms of stopping the behavior then the assumption is women would learn to drop these messages from their repertoire and opt for directness. However, there may be other relational and/or social goals to be taken into account in the selection of a message, and there may be perceived problematic consequences of using direct messages. Several studies have looked at the varying directness of women's resistance messages in general (Perper & Weis, 1987; McCormick, 1979; Byers & Lewis, 1988). One such study found that less direct messages feel more "comfortable" and less face-threatening than more direct resistance messages (Metts, Cupach, & Imahori, 1992). Additionally, women tend to be more attentive than their male counterparts to face-saving and other relational concerns (Maltz & Borker, 1982). However, no research to date has addressed the reasons women use indirect messages when trying to prevent sexual escalation. The purpose of the current research, therefore, is to identify the various goals for the woman in these circumstances and the potential problems of using direct messages.

RQ: Why are females reluctant to use direct messages when attempting to thwart male escalation of sexual intimacy?

Focus Group Method

Subjects

Six female students were recruited from undergraduate communication classes at a large Southwestern university. On one occasion a focus group was conducted with four women, and at another time with two women. While all the participants are female and Caucasian, names and specific descriptions of each person are not reported for identity protection purposes. Responses are reported in aggregate rather than attaching ideas and experiences to specific individuals.

Procedure

A classroom was selected in the Department of Communication at a large southwestern university. The participants and I were seated on chairs around a rectangular table. A large tape player was available both to play music and to tape record the session. The table was covered with snacks, and a "Do Not Disturb" sign was placed on the door for purposes of privacy. I wanted to the room and the experience to feel causal, comfortable, and non-academic. I did not want the sensation of a classroom with right or wrong answers and inhibitions, but rather the feeling of some women just sitting around discussing issues in their lives.

To get us in the mood, I began by playing "Let's Talk About Sex", a rap song by two female artists Salt 'N Pepa, while the participants reviewed and signed a letter of consent. As they were signing the letter, I pointed out the importance of confidentiality, and that signing the letter indicated to me and to the other group members that no one would talk about the experience of other participants outside of the group. After they returned their consent forms to me, I turned off the music and began recording our

conversation. We began by discussing the merits of low fat potato chips and low fat twinkies. When the group had reached a level of comfort with the tape recorder, indicated by lively conversation and laughing, I began by explaining the findings from the previous study (Motley & Reeder, 1994). That is, women tend to use indirect messages when trying to stop their dates' sexual advances. The focus group was guided by a list of previously developed probes to assess the research question (Appendix A) and by supplemental questions that emerged during the group process.

Coding and Analysis

The tape recorded session was later transcribed into a running log. Strauss and Corbin's (1990) open, axial, and selective coding process was used to analyze the data. Open coding consisted of labeling each piece of data, with each distinct idea or concept as the unit of analysis. The labeled data was then organized into categories, or groups of concepts. These groups of concepts were then combined as subcategories into more encompassing categories using the paradigm model (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Finally, the selective coding process was used to identify the core category and its relationship to the other categories. The findings of this process are presented below.

Results

Reasons cited in the focus groups for why women use indirect messages ranged from negative past experiences, to societal norms, to level of maturity and personality traits of the male and female. For this study, however, I focused specifically on the perceived relational consequences of using direct messages which influenced women to be indirect. Four categories of outcomes for direct messages emerged: Her perception of his feelings, her perception of his thoughts, her perception of

his behavior, and her perception of her own feelings. Within each category there are subcategories of outcomes that range on a continuum from positive to negative (left to right, respectively). Each continuum will be presented visually, followed by a description and examples of the subcategories. Finally, the relationships between categories will be addressed.

Her Perception of His Feelings (if she is direct)

He feels... understanding (Not typical)	He feels... -insecure -hurt/damaged ego -offended -upset with her	He feels... -angry -defensive

The best possible outcome of either a direct or indirect message is that the woman's date understands the content of her message, and is also understanding about her choice not to go along with the escalation of sexual intimacy. While a man is likely to understand a direct message to mean resistance, feelings of acceptance and understanding toward her decision are not what these women perceived to be the typical response. Rather, the more common outcome is that she perceives him to experience more negative feelings, both in general and toward her.

These women perceived that direct communication makes men feel hurt, insecure, offended, and may damage his ego. One respondent explained, "Well, if you like the person, you don't want to hurt their feelings." Another believes that his misunderstanding of her intentions can result in these hurt feelings, "If I thought I hurt their feelings and they misinterpreted what I meant, you know, like, 'I don't like you as a person' is not what you mean when you say, 'No, I don't want to have sex with you'." Another wanted to protect his feelings even if she wasn't interested in him, "I would

still be nice to people even if I wanted to cut it (the relationship) off completely."

On the far right of the continuum, and the most negative outcome, is her perception that he feels defensive and angry after she directly tells him she does not want to have sex. Throughout the focus group the women made comments like, "I really think they get, like, sort of, like, 'wait a minute', you know, 'I'm supposed to have the power play. I'm the one in control here. And if you're getting direct with me you're taking away a portion of my power' and they get real defensive"; "That's why a lot of times you're not direct because it's like in her instance, I mean, if you feel the guy has that tendency maybe to get violent or to defend, then you don't want to be direct"; "I don't know anyone who would be totally positive about it, he'd still be like pissed."

Her Perception of His Thoughts (if she is direct)

He is understanding (Not typical)	He thinks she is... -a bitch -uptight -prude -a jerk	He thinks... -she doesn't want a relationship

Similar to her perception of his feelings, the best thing he could be thinking are thoughts of understanding and acceptance. However, this is not the common perception of these women. Rather, they believe that he will think negatively about her. These women said they use indirect messages so they won't be thought of as a "bitch", "uptight", "so the girl doesn't look like prude or a jerk." Direct messages could have long-term repercussions when the woman perceives that the man thinks she is not interested in having a relationship with him. One woman explains, "If I just

said 'No' he might think that I really have no interest in him at all." He might think, "'well, forget it it's not going to go any further'" or "'she doesn't like me, I'm not going to pursue this', you know, 'too heck with her'."

Her Perception of His Behavior (if she is direct)

He says... "Okay, I understand" (Not typical)	He... -pulls a pity ploy -withdraws -stops talking -gets quiet -pushes away -pouts	He... -never talks to her again -tells his friends negative things about her	He... -fights -rapes

This continuum looks at her perception of his behavior following a direct message. The best possible outcome is that he says, "Okay, I understand," but the women do not see this behavior as a typical response. "I don't think I know any guy who would just say, "Oh, yeah, I respect that and I respect you." "I don't think I know anyone who would do that." "I can't remember a time when I have used a direct message and had a positive outcome." One respondent had the rare experience of the man being understanding, but she recalls that she was "more indirect than direct" as well as being friends with the man prior to their sexual encounter.

Another reaction, moving toward the negative side of the continuum is that she perceives that he pulls a ploy to be pitied by her. These women have recollections of men saying things like, "Don't you trust me?", "Don't you feel comfortable around me?", "Do you think I'm only after one thing? I really care about you", or "WHAT'S WRONG?" While the women perceived some men as engaging in this form of conversation, other men would simply withdraw. The man may get, "quiet, and start to

kind of, you know, push himself away from you and don't say anything, er, don't talk to you as much." He would, "get quiet on you", "sulk", and become "pouty," or "like mine withdrew."

Even worse than the withdrawal in that moment is that in her experience using direct messages leads him to never talk to her again. One woman explains, "I'm a very direct person. And I've found that because I am direct I've had like minimal relationships for like two months because I will say exactly what I want, and now I try not to do that." Another woman recalls, "I was direct once with a guy too and I just went out and told him, I go, 'If you continue on doing this I'm never gonna return your phone calls or call you again, er, anything like that. He continued on doing it, and so, here I'm driving, I took him home, I dropped him off, and I never talked to him again." Another recalls, "He didn't talk to me for three years."

Along with never talking to her again and cutting off a potential relationship completely, she believes he may tell his friends lies and negative things about her. One woman explains, "If you tell a guy 'No' and then he goes back and tells his friends you're a bitch...makes you not be so direct, you learn." She continues, "I think that the worst thing probably is that a guy turned around and said, like as far as sexually, that I <u>had</u> done things with him that I <u>hadn't</u>... trying to deface me because maybe he felt hurt, or I don't know what their motives... but he was pretty nasty about it." Another woman recalls, "For me, it was he went around telling people that I was gay, that I was a lesbian. But I laugh. This one girl came up and said, 'Oh well, he told me not to talk to you anymore because you're a lesbian. I'm like (laugh), okay, whatever."

The worst of all possible behavioral outcomes for these women is that he fights with her or rapes her. One woman recalls, "We were at his house, we'd been dating for a short time and I had said, you know, look I'm not ready for this, you know, I was very direct, I probably was a little short with him and I shouldn't have been, but ahh, it ended in an actual fight... Just shoving. Just my only actual fight-fight that I've been in, you know with a guy." A similar situation occurred for another group member, "I went out with this guy and, um, he, we were kissing and it started getting really out of hand and I told him to stop and I said 'Get away, I don't want to do this', and I was very direct and, he raped me." This story touched something in the first respondent, and she continued, "Something I didn't say earlier is that when we did get in that fight I did get in the same situation, the exact same situation, I wasn't going to say anything, but I want you to know, she's the only one that I told (referring to her roommate)...I'm a little scared to be direct now, because it could end up in rape."

Her Perception of Her Own Feelings

She feels... -good about herself	She feels... -embarrassed -stupid -questions self -he won't like her	She feels... -fear -intimidation

An important contributor to learning not to be direct is how these women recall feeling after they were direct with a man. These feeling about herself also range on a continuum from highly positive to highly negative. On the positive end, sending direct messages has the potential for her to feel very good about herself. In the situation where she was raped, this woman recalls, "the only way I ever forgave myself for that is

because I was direct and I got over it, not right away, it took a long time, but it was only because I felt there was nothing I could do, and now I don't even think about it the way I did because a month after it happened I felt really dirty and gross, but now I feel like, I said, 'stop'...I would have felt the same way but I never would have got over it- I still felt raped, but I felt like it wasn't my fault." Similarly the other rape survivor believes that her directness was what allowed her to not blame herself, "that's the only way she (my roommate) said I could deal with the situation, that hey, I said no, I was very direct, and at least when people said- cause you know we had dated for sometime and had slept together before, and I heard people say 'you were dating him, what do you mean he raped you?' Had I not been direct about it I would felt maybe I lead him on... but still, you can say, 'that wasn't my fault', I was as direct as I could be, it happened and I feel horrible that it happened, but I feel good about myself."

The other women said they could feel good about themselves simply because they had been self-confident enough to be direct. One woman claims, "I'd feel better about myself for making that decision, because for me I know if I'm in that situation and I feel like I have to think about it, then it's not what I want. That's the way I look at it. Cause I've been in situations where I haven't had to think about it, and I've had no regrets, but I've also been in situations where I've thought 'no I don't wanna', and I've regretted it, I would definitely be proud of myself if I said 'listen', if he doesn't respect that that's his problem."

Moving toward the negative end of the continuum there is the potential for her to feel bad or wrong for being direct. One respondent said, "I'd feel stupid if I said, 'No'." Another said, "I get embarrassed to be direct." After an experience where the man did not talk to her after she

was direct, one woman said, "I started to think that I was wrong (for being direct)." Another woman had these types of concerns even if she was not interested in pursing a relationship with the man, "Even if the guy didn't want to date or I didn't want to date anymore I would still feel bad if he didn't like- even if I knew I was never going to talk to him again, I wouldn't like myself if I thought... he doesn't like me."

On the far end of negative possibilities is that she will feel fear and intimidation to say a direct, "No" to her date. The woman who got in a fight with her boyfriend and was then raped reflects, "I learned, I'm a pretty direct person, ever since then I've been very intimidated to be direct." Another respondent agreed, "In situations where you don't want it to happen I think it's really intimidating for somebody to say, 'Look, stop'."

Relationship between categories. As may be apparent, there are relationships between these continuums. Looking up the left side of all four continuums are that she perceives he has thoughts, feelings, and expressions of understanding and she feels good about herself. Like one group member said, "It (my feeling about myself) depends on if you felt like you hurt their feelings or if they were really cool about it."

Continuing toward the right of the four continuums her perceptions of his actions are becoming increasingly negative. When he acts pitiful, withdraws, stops talking, pouts, cuts of the relationship from her, or tells his friends negative things about her, she interprets this to mean that he feels hurt or insecure, that his ego has been damaged in some way, and that he thinks she is an uptight bitch who doesn't like him and doesn't want a relationship. Because of these reactions she feels bad, stupid, and afraid that he doesn't like her. "I'd feel kind of bad if he didn't express any feelings about it, if he didn't say anything and just got up and did whatever. I'd feel

kind of shitty after that." Statements such as this linked her feeling bad to whatever emotional pain she had caused him.

On the far right of the continuum is the behavior of fighting or rape, leading her to believe he is angry, to which she responds in fear and intimidation. One of the rape survivors' statement showed this fear connection; "I'm a little scared to be direct now, because it could end in rape."

Questionnaire Method

While much rich data was provided by these focus groups, the inability to generalize led us (Motley & Reeder, 1994) to develop and administer questionnaires. General findings from the focus groups suggested that female participants believe a) there *are* negative relational consequences of resistance messages, b) these consequences are especially likely to occur with *direct* messages, and c) these perceived consequences often account for women's reluctance to use direct messages. These general impressions were treated as a hypothesis for the questionnaire-based study.

H: Women view relational consequences (via negative male reactions) to be a significantly more likely outcome of direct resistance messages than of indirect resistance messages.

Participants

Participants were 29 female students in various communication courses at a West Coast University. All respondents had lived in the United States for at least the past 10 years.

Procedure

We narrowed down the concerns cited by the women in the focus groups into six primary consequences: A) He will think of her as uptight or a

prude, B) he will feel offended or upset, C) he will feel angry, D) he will think of her as a bitch or a jerk, E) he will feel hurt, F) he will think that she doesn't want a relationship, and/or will be reluctant to date her again. These potential consequences were used to develop a questionnaire in the following format:

IMAGINE THE FOLLOWING SCENARIO: You and a male companion are alone on your first, second, third, or so date. The two of you begin to get physical. The physical intimacy progresses, maybe a little, maybe a lot. You indicate that you don't want the intimacy to go any further by saying "(Resistance Message)." WOULD HE--

A. Think you're a prude?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Yes	Probably Yes	Uncertain		Probably No		No

B. Be disappointed?

(Same scale repeated for this and remaining items.)
C. Be offended?
D. Be angry?
E. Think you're a bitch?
F. Feel hurt?
G. Decide not to date you again?

Participants responded to this scenario-and-consequences set for each of three direct resistance messages and three indirect messages as identified in the previous study (Motley & Reeder, 1994). In particular, direct messages were "Please don't do that," "Let's stop this," and "I don't want to do this." Indirect messages were "I don't think I know you well enough for this," "I can't do this unless you're committed to me," and "I'm having my period." The negative consequences, as identified by the female focus group were randomly ordered. (The "disappointed" consequence was not identified by the female focus groups, but rather by a male focus group in a related study).

While the six variations of the resistance scenario provided the data relevant to the hypotheses, they were preceded by three other scenario-

and-consequences sets designed to disguise the questionnaire's primary purpose. The bogus sections were in the general format described above. They provided three different potential face-threat scenarios, none of them sexual, with adapted "relational consequence" items and adapted messages designed to represent differing degrees of equivocation. Questionnaires were completed anonymously.

Analysis

Each participants' responses were collapsed (summed) for the three direct resistance messages, and for the three indirect resistance messages, within each of the seven "consequences." This approach was justified by high ($p < .001$) intercorrelations between the responses for the three combined items in virtually every case. In each case, the collapsed (summed) scores could range from 3 to 21, with lower scores indicating greater perceived likelihood of the corresponding relational consequence.

Results

Means are presented in Table 1. As a general observation, the differences between means are in the predicted direction.

INSERT TABLE 1

F values for main effects are provided in Table 1. The main effect for directness versus indirectness is significant ($p < .05$ to $< .001$) in all cases. That is, participants overall perceive each of the potential relational consequences to be a significantly more likely outcome of direct resistance messages than of indirect resistance messages. The hypothesis was also tested by comparing direct versus indirect means via t-tests.

These t-values are presented in Table 1. For each of the potential consequences except one, women perceived the likelihood of a negative occurrence to be significantly greater ($p < .05$) for direct resistance messages than for indirect resistance messages. (The only exception was for the "disappointment" consequence which was not generated in the female focus groups.)

Discussion

In general the questionnaire results confirmed the impressions provided by the female focus groups. Women apparently consider certain relational consequences to be reasonably likely outcomes of their sexual resistance messages, and view these as especially likely outcomes of direct resistance messages. The anticipation of negative outcomes may contribute to women's reluctance to use direct messages in this context.

The intent of this paper was to supply an example of combining qualitative and quantitative methods for greater understanding. Our goal as social scientists is to do the most accurate job possible describing, understanding, and explaining phenomena in the social world. Using multiple methods allows us to achieve more confidence in these results. It is my hope that rather than debating over which method is "better", we as researchers can spend our time utilizing all available methods that are relevant to a given question. As we expand our ways of knowing, so will we expand our knowing.

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Table 1

	Means		Main effects	T-scores
	Direct	Indirect	F(1,52)	t(52)
Think she's prude	9.48	12.93	35.08**	1.93*
Be disappointed	7.59	8.31	5.27*	1.18 ns
Be offended	10.14	14.03	59.75**	1.78*
Be angry	9.93	12.45	29.48**	1.91*
Think she's a bitch	11.93	15.17	37.73**	2.10*
Be hurt	11.00	14.10	47.64**	1.70*
Decide not to date her again	11.62	13.69	14.29**	1.73*

For the means, lower score represent judgements of greater perceived liklihood for the relational consequences. The potential range of score is 3-21. * = p , .05, ** = p < .001

Appendix A

Probes:

-Why don't we use direct messages when attempting to thwart male escalation of sexual intimacy?

-Why do we continue to use ambigous messages?

-Do we think these ambigous messages will be understood and complied with?

-What do you think men would think if you were direct?

-What do you think men would do if you were direct?

-How would you feel if you were direct with a man in this situation? And do you have the right?

-What are the potential negative outcomes of directness?

-What are the potential positive outcomes of directness?

-What would be the ideal outcome of a resistance message?

-How do you know if a message is successful?

-What kinds of things could you say that would get him to understand you and also acheive your other goals?